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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN POLITICS III #17: A SKETCH OF
PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES

Classified By: Economic-Political Counselor Michael A. Meigs, Reasons 1
.4(b), (d)

1. (U) This is the 17th cable in our series on political
events the third year of the presidency of Leonel Fernandez.

A SKETCH OF PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES

(U) The Dominican presidential election is set for May 16,
2008 -- 15 months from now -- but campaigning is already
heavy. President Fernandez is one of three PLD candidates
proposed to the party for its May 11 vote, even though he has
not formally declared his candidacy. He is eligible for
re-election, under terms of the constitutional amendment
passed by Congress in 2002 authorizing his predecessor to
seek re-election.

(U) Candidacies are outlined below.

Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD)

(U) On January 28 a PRD national vote selected former public
works minister Miguel Vargas Maldonado as the candidate, by a
vote of more than 80 percent. Opponent Milagros Ortiz Bosch
promptly conceded the election, after consulting with other
greybeards of the party. Vargas Maldonado had concentrated
on party faithful in previous months but now has begun to
reach out to the broader public. Wealthy from construction
enterprises and supported by former president Hipolito Mejia
as the executive that this country needs.

Partido de Liberacion Dominicana (PLD)

(U) Although President Fernandez has not publicly declared his intention to run for re-election, on February 10 the 200-member Political Committee accepted by unanimous vote the proposal that the PLD,s May 11 national primary ballot feature Fernandez, his former chief of staff Danilo Medina, and former senator for Santo Domingo Jose Tomas Perez.

(U) Danilo Medina was PLD candidate in 2000, when Fernandez was barred by constitutional provisions from seeking re-election. He came in a poor second to Hipolito Mejia (49 percent) and Joaquin Balaguer. Medina has strong support in Congress and among senior PLD leaders. He has chosen to campaign not against Fernandez but rather against the concept of &re-electionism,8 asserting that from the party,s very beginnings it has been opposed to &continuism.8 He asserts that the PLD is strong enough to engage in internal democracy and expects that after the vote, &we will all dust ourselves off and go out to win the presidential election.8

(SBU) Former senator Jos Toms Prez declared himself a candidate last October, but his base in Santo Domingo is relatively narrow. He had to defer to PLD Secretary General Reynaldo Pared Perez for the 2006 elections, declining to run so that Pared Perez could take the slot (and eventually become president of the Senate). The tactic of endorsing the three nominations by acclamation was kind to Perez, who was unlikely to reach the 33 percent threshold stipulated in the rules.

(C) Leonel Fernandez has been taking care of business around the country but has not formally declared his desire for a third term. He continues his familiar, non-controversial presidency, appearing at inauguration ceremonies,

congratulating students and receiving visitors. He has not engaged in controversy or exerted much leadership. He may talk re-election during his national day address on February 27 - - or he may devote that address to big themes and his process of constitutional reform.

(C) Fernandez commented to the Ambassador on February 14 that he did not consider himself a candidate for re-election, at least, not yet. He says that his candidacy will begin only when the PLD selects him in May.

(SBU) Fernandez is the country,s most admired public figure, according to the polls, even if the percentages have slipped somewhat in recent months. He can expect strong support from the newly created mass base of the PLD. He will cordially explain why his vision will be better for the party and the country than Danilo,s, and he will probably win.

Partido Reformista Social Cristiano (PRSC)
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(SBU) The &reformistas8 have not yet reassembled themselves from the triple catastrophes of the death of former president Balaguer, Eduardo Estrella,s humiliating score of 8.65 percent in the 2004 presidential election, and the debacle of the PRSC-PRD alliance for the 2006 congressional and municipal elections. They have not yet set the date of their selection of a presidential candidate. April appears to be a likely season.

(SBU) Amable Aristy Castro, baron of the easternmost province of Altagracia, is an unusual, uncommunicative figure and he may for that very reason see himself as an heir to Joaquin Balaguer. He has run the League of Municipalities (LMD) for the past eight years, channeling central government funds to municipalities across the country, and this enormous source of patronage has given him power. His province elected him as its senator for the third time in 2006 and, as before, he eventually withdrew and had the party name a replacement (a relative by marriage). Amable struck deals and received the support of both other major parties for his late January re-election as director of the LMD. He openly aspires to the PRSC presidential nomination.

(SBU) Aristy Castro faced a setback last February when the U.S. Embassy refused to renew his visa; after review, the consulate informed him earlier this month that no ineligibility existed. Aristy called a press conference on February 12 to wave his newly re-issued visa and to hail the justice dispensed by the U.S. authorities. (In December he had suffered chest pains and the Embassy had obtained a waiver so as to allow him to travel to Miami for medical treatment.)

(SBU) Some speculate that Aristy might be looking for an opportunity to run as the vice presidential candidate of the PRD, s Miguel Vargas Maldonado.

(SBU) Eduardo Estrella, the party, s unsuccessful candidate in 2004, is admired by many as an honest, decent man who has almost no chance in electoral politics. Estrella opposed the 2006 alliance with the PRD but that does not seem to have advanced his PRSC prospects. He is quoted in the press from time to time, and he arouses sympathy rather than excitement.

(SBU) Luis Toral announced his presidential aspirations on October 12, 2006. His staff maintains an extensive campaign website at www.luistoral.com that includes a countdown to the 2008 presidential inauguration. Toral, 49, an economist, is a longtime PRSC insider, having served Balaguer on the presidential staff, as governor of the Central Bank, as

minister without portfolio, and as campaign manager for Balaguer, s final, unsuccessful bid in 2000. He speaks regularly to party gatherings, usually with harsh criticisms of Fernandez and the PLD government. One disadvantage is that he has never won elective office, losing a nomination for mayor and a race for senator in 1998 in his hometown of Barahona.

(SBU) Result expected in the PRSC primary: a strongly contested race between Aristy Castro and Toral; either might pull it off.

12. (U) This report and extensive other material can be consulted on our SIPRNET site, <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo/>
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